

US lawmakers warning American soldiers not equipped with right protective equipment for biological or chemical attack

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While those inspections continue, the United States is still preparing for the possibility of war with Iraq. Today some US lawmakers warned that American soldiers may not have the right suits to protect them against biological or chemical weapons. NBC's Rosiland Jordan reports.

ROSILAND JORDAN reporting:

The Gulf War, 1991, US troops issued protective gear against biological and chemical warfare. The Iraqis never used those weapons, but hundreds of thousands of suits made for that conflict may still be in circulation. And there are concerns in Congress that some may be defective, putting US troops at risk. Representative CHRISTOPHER SHAYS (Republican, Connecticut): We need to highlight this issue. We need to put pressure on DOD to say with all the other things you're focused in, don't forget this very serious issue. Make sure the men and women we send into battle have the best equipment and that they've had an opportunity to train with it.

JORDAN: The problem brought out in a GAO report to Congress. Hundreds of thousands of defective suits possibly mixed in with good ones. One Democratic member of Congress found the information so disturbing she's written a letter to Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld asking him to certify troops headed for the region will get equipment that will protect their lives.

TEXT:

REP. JANICE SCHAKOWSKY

"I, DONALD RUMSFELD, SECRETARY OF DEFENSE, CERTIFY THAT ALL UNITED STATES ARMED FORCES THAT COULD BE DEPLOYED, OR ARE INTENDED TO BE DEPLOYED, AGAINST IRAQ... HAVE BEEN PROVIDED WITH EQUIPMENT TO PROTECT AGAINST CHEMICAL AND BIOLOGICAL ATTACKS..."

Representative JAN SCHAKOWSKY (Democrat, Illinois): Parents of this country who are willing to see their children go off to--to war at least want to know that they're--that they have as much protection as possible.

JORDAN: A Pentagon official tells NBC News this is a very small problem, 1.6 million new protective suits, which have passed DOD testing now on hand; another 190,000 suits now being produced every month for the near future. But a former Gulf War commander says what was a real concern 11 years ago has been fixed.

Retired General BARRY McCaffrey (NBC News Military Analyst): There should be no doubt in anybody's mind that this is something we are prepared to handle.

JORDAN: Congressman Shays says the military needs to make sure American troops will be able to protect themselves, otherwise...

Cong. SHAYS: If we rush into battle and do it now, I think they have reason to be concerned.

JORDAN: Congressman Shays says this is not something the White House needs to deal with yet, but with the prospect of war looming, he says the government needs to make sure all American troops will be fully prepared. Rosiland Jordan, NBC News, the White House.